

Beyond Ephgrave: Reflecting on the implementation of 'In The Moment Planning'
in a rural day nursery.

I own a nursery in a rural location in Worcestershire. I had been a teaching assistant then teacher in Primary schools for 15 years and a SENCo for 7 years. Three years ago I left school looking for a new challenge. My husband was looking to invest some money, and we found this little rural nursery:



It may seem idyllic, but recent OFSTED inspection had not been favourable, identifying weaknesses such as:

- *Required staff to child ratios not always met, risks and hazards not quickly identified and addressed, medication procedures lack rigour and attendance records are incomplete.*
- *Assessment procedures lack consistency. In particular, progress checks for children between two and three years have not been completed to enable staff and parents to work together to plan future learning.*

- *Ineffective systems for monitoring and evaluating quality and impact of provision on care, learning and development, and for highlighting and promptly addressing areas for improvement.*
- *Staff do not always effectively manage toys and resources to foster children's choices, independence and better understanding of safety. (OFSTED, 2014).*

To put the 'icing on the cake' just as I was signing on the dotted line, the local paper reported:

"Nursery slammed by inspectors in damning report: A Nursery has been rated 'inadequate' by Ofsted for the second time in six months. Inspectors have lambasted the Nursery for compromising children's welfare and safety and putting them at risk of accident or injury". (Worcester News, June 2015).

I said I wanted a challenge but staff morale was at an all-time low and practitioners did not want to be associated with the setting. The environment needed a complete overhaul, as did the paperwork and practice. Within eight months, more staff had been recruited and trained, the environment had been developed, resources purchased and all relevant paperwork was updated. Our first inspection under new ownership was graded 'good', though not yet outstanding because:

"some staff do not set precise targets to help children make best possible progress. Although the manager/provider uses targeted training to raise the quality of teaching, information from observing staff practice is not used during staff supervision to raise teaching even further" (OFSTED, 2016, p1).

Therefore the Nursery needed to consider how to improve children's progress and raise teaching standards. There is a key link between teaching and learning: Nuthall (2004) says an effective teacher understands individual students through observation and reflection. Activities and experiences should be recorded on a continuous basis and changes acted on. By interpreting and understanding behaviours and knowing the

full context, effective teachers understand that individual learners have different experiences within the same classroom.

Traditionally the Nursery planned activities well in advance, delivering 'topics' every month to 6 weeks with focus group activities for all children. This can result in a 'production-line' of near identical artwork or discussions where the same children always answer. Activities were often adult-led and children *told*, not asked, what they would be doing. Practitioners spent a lot of time creating beautiful displays and topic corners only for children to express little interest. 'Next steps' were identified for each child through rigorous assessments but practitioners struggled to prepare relevant activities to meet individual next steps. A high number of short observations evidenced assessments through each child's learning journey.

"Only when teachers understand the principles by which their actions shape the learning process...will they be able to ensure effective learning" (Nuthall, 2004, p.301).

After reflecting on my own standpoint in regards to children's learning and researching possible strategies for developing practice, I came across *The Nursery Year in Action* (Ephgrave, 2015); the view that each individual child should have their needs met really resonated with me.

I suggested exploring this approach and in August 2017 the pre-school leader started to develop ITMP (In the Moment Planning) with her class and training the other staff in this approach. By January changes to the environment had been made. Staff decided to get rid of the majority of the plastic resources, replacing with natural resources such as pebbles, fir cones, shells and 'real resources' such as metal cutlery, crockery and jam jars. Displays were used to display children's individual artwork, photos of family and captured moments of learning from a child's perspective.

Most planning became retrospective, only noting children's interests and starting points and how adults facilitated or moved on the learning. Practitioners now focus on two children a week to make detailed observations, developing deeper understanding of individual needs. This vastly reduced paperwork so staff spent more time interacting with children rather than making unnecessary and copious notes.

ITMP was introduced by Anna Ephgrave and her pedagogy has inspired settings in the UK and abroad. Recognising that children are born with a natural desire to explore and learn, Ephgrave argues that practitioners best support this by creating enabling environments and through relationships and interaction.

"We do not plan ahead, we remain 'in the moment' with the children as they explore and learn. We observe carefully, enhancing the learning whenever we spot a teachable moment. Our observations, interactions and the outcomes are recorded afterwards". (Ephgrave, 2015, p.2)

Adopting this approach enables children to become engrossed in something that fascinates, challenges and makes them happy. The idea that happiness influences children's levels of engagement is nothing new and is embodied in the Danish concept of *hygge*. Meik Wiking (cited in Creasey, 2017) states that 'hyggeligt' experience is created through a focus on the atmosphere in the room, particularly lighting. "The rule of thumb is the lower the temperature of the light the better, and the more hyggeligt" (p.4).

Hygge also focuses on social activity, strong community and friendship ties because "by playing games together, you create common memories and strengthen bonds" (Wiking, cited in Creasey, 2017). Making conscious decisions is a crucial first step, seeking out opportunities to boost wellbeing and reflecting on how successful this is. Hodgkins and Prowle (2016) suggest that a hygge environment should be as homely as possible with natural materials, warmth and soft lighting to create comfort and cosiness.

Other historical influences on Ephgrave's pedagogy can be founded in Italy. Maria Montessori viewed the environment as not only the space but furnishings, materials, adults and children themselves as well as the outdoor environments. She thought early childhood teachers should provide real tools and keep resources accessible where children can find and put away what they need independently. *"They should not have to interrupt their work to get the attention of a busy teacher or ask permission to use materials they need"* (Mooney, 2013).

Montessori believed that adults should not 'serve' children: instead they should make opportunities for children to do things for themselves. She thought that practitioners should prepare the environment including appropriate materials, 'stepping back' to allow children to experiment and increase their competence whenever possible. By allowing children to choose their own activities, teachers have more time to observe and assist individuals – she stressed that children should not be pulled away from their interests unless absolutely necessary. Montessori thought the key to determining these interests is careful observation. *"If children are not learning, adults are not listening or watching carefully and closely enough"* (Mooney, 2013).

A further Italian influence is Reggio Emilia where educators use a combination of artistic expression, projects, and engaging environments to establish learning communities. Teaching and learning is based on the formation of relationships between participants, materials and their environments. Educators see children as active participants with the capacity to construct their own learning. Reggio teachers understand and believe that learning is not a result of direct teaching but relates to how children interpret interactions with people, places, materials and ideas. A relaxed pace allows sufficient time to engage with peers, become deeply involved in projects and complete tasks to children's satisfaction. Reggio teachers are mindful of children's sense of time and their own rhythms so plan encounters at their pace.

Reggio environments are naturally lit, using healthy living plants and comfortable furnishings to create inviting spaces that encourage children to stay and engage. Walls document children's experiences and exhibit collaborative work to spark conversation. Spaces are planned for children to engage with materials in a focussed way, reducing the need for constant intervention. *"A carefully conceived environment allows the teacher to focus their energy on working with the children ...not managing them"* (McNally and Slutsky, 2017, p.1928). Reggio teachers use a pedagogy of listening to unearth questions, theories and interpretations children have about their experiences, then work with them to express their ideas. The practitioner's role is to provoke 'occasions of discovery' .

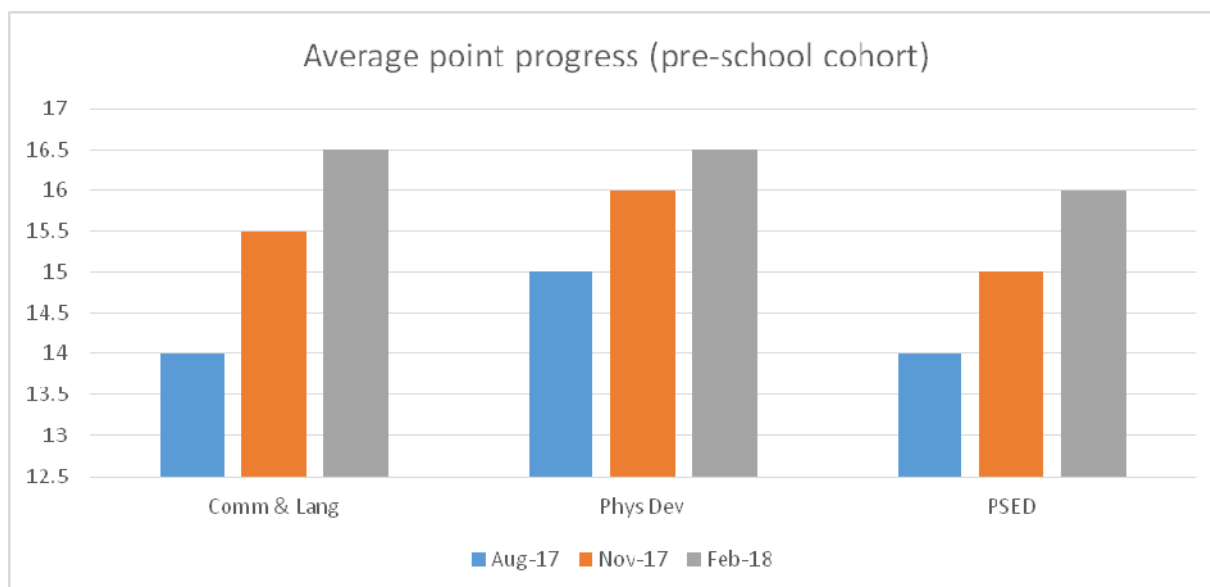
Building on research into ITMP I knew this was something I wanted to incorporate into our practice. Initially Nursery staff were unsure about the new approach, especially regarding record keeping, identifying 'teachable moments' and having confidence to allow children to lead the learning, however, after discussion the change was agreed. The readiness to change varies within individuals, even when the organization desperately needs to change. Trybus (2011) says a leader must understand resistance to change and anticipate the inherent push back that change provokes. This means the change-agent may have to make compromises to meet the needs of the organization while still being responsive to needs of the individual. (p34). Some of the staff reflected upon the challenges of ITMP with comments such as:

- *Ensure access to a camera at all times to take pictures of interactions with children, as you can forget what you've done to record it*
- *Ensure the room is always stocked up with all resources needed to facilitate 'planning' in the moment, continuing to be spontaneous and have new ideas.*
- *Remember what is classed as "teaching" as you sometimes forget that the input you're giving is teaching'*

The Nursery held a parents' evening to explain changes and display the new environment. We also get parents involved by sending a target sheet home every 6 weeks with a camera, asking them to share with us what their child has been doing during a focus week, in order to gain a deeper understanding of children outside the setting. This draws on Reggio philosophy that values parents' knowledge of their child's interests and experiences (Thornton and Brunton, 2005).

A further challenge stemming from the change in practice was the point that the Nursery had already been graded as 'good' under the old system, so why change? Referring back to the previous discussion on change (Trybus, 2011), I recognise the fact that there may be a conflict between meeting the needs of the organisation: moving from 'good' to 'outstanding', and responding to individual needs: children, parents, staff.

Throughout this reflective study I have identified the drive for change from a need to improve our Ofsted rating, whilst demonstrating that meeting individual needs was a priority. This could be argued as conflicting pedagogies, however I would argue that ITMP has enabled us to improve children's progress and raise teaching standards (Ofsted, 2018). Our progress records demonstrate that in the six months from August 2017 and February 2018 pre-school children made accelerated progress in the three prime areas (see table below). *'Where children are given a voice and responsibility in their schooling, both behaviour and learning improve'* (Rutter *et al.*, 1979, cited in Lewis and Lindsay, 2000, p.30).



Children made most progress in the area of Communication and Language, demonstrating that they now have confidence and freedom to express their views. O’Kane and Dolan suggest adults must find ways to elicit and act on the views of young children (2008) and part of our approach is ensuring that we use a variety of strategies to support even the youngest child to express their views. We await our next inspection with little trepidation, having the confidence that we do what is best for our children and current results show that they continue to make excellent progress.

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